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UNITED STATES SENATOR • TEXAS

Prepare Before Disaster Strikes

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Recently, our country was reminded by three hurricanes of the lessons we learned in the wake of September 11, 2001: our nation's true first responders are the men and women serving on the ground in local police departments, fire departments, and emergency rooms across this country. These are the same men and women who play a vital and responsive role during natural disasters such as the ones resulting from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. We as citizens must do all we can to ensure these first responders are able to fully carry out their duties in the most efficient manner possible.

One very important way each citizen can help is by being prepared to face the unexpected – and the value of such preparation cannot be overstated. Each person that is ready to care for him or herself in the event of an emergency is one less person a first responder must care for as they seek to locate and treat those less fortunate who found themselves directly in harm's way. By helping yourself and your family members, you will help your entire community. Your initiative will allow first responders to focus on the most immediate and critical needs.

One of the most important steps each citizen can take is to formulate a personal or family disaster plan. Each person should create, rehearse, and be ready to implement such a plan at a moment's notice. There are many useful resources to help you with creating such a plan of action.

Two of the most helpful resources were created by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the American Red Cross, and can be found at www.ready.gov, and www.redcross.org, respectively. These valuable tools provide brief descriptions of various types of emergencies, as well as in-depth guidelines for formulation of a family disaster plan and compiling an emergency supply kit. According to the Red Cross, the following are key elements in emergency preparedness:

Find Out What Could Happen to You

Contact your local Red Cross chapter or emergency management office before a disaster occurs. Learn the types of disasters that are most likely to happen, and request information on how to prepare for each. Learn about your community's emergency alerts: what they sound like and what you should do when you hear them. Methods of getting your attention vary from community to community. One common method is to broadcast via emergency radio and TV broadcasts. You might hear a special siren, or

get a telephone call, or emergency workers may go door-to-door. Ask about animal care after a disaster, and be aware that in many cases, animals are not allowed inside emergency shelters because of health regulations. You may also want to inquire about emergency plans at places where your family spends time: work, daycare and school. If no plans exist, consider volunteering to help create one. Talk to your neighbors about how you can work together in the event of an emergency.

Create a Disaster Plan

Meet with your family and discuss why you need to prepare for disaster. Explain the dangers of fire, severe weather, and earthquakes to children. Plan to share responsibilities and work together as a team. Discuss the types of disasters that are most likely to happen. Explain what to do in each case. Pick two places to meet: Right outside your home in case of a sudden emergency, like a fire, or outside your neighborhood in case you can't return home. Everyone must know the address and phone number. Ask an out-of-state friend to be your "family contact." Other family members should call this person and tell them where they are. Everyone must know your contact's phone number. Discuss what to do in an evacuation.

Practice and Maintain Your Plan

Quiz your family frequently about your plan. Conduct fire and emergency evacuations. Take care to replace stored water and stored food every six months, test and recharge your fire extinguishers according to manufacturer's instructions, and test your smoke detectors monthly and be sure to change the batteries at least once a year.

Please take time now to prepare and communicate. In doing so, you increase the likelihood of safely reuniting with family and loved ones during an emergency, decrease the burden on first responders, and benefit our communities and our state as a whole.

*For more information, the following websites contain valuable resources regarding family disaster plans, school and workplace preparedness, helping the disabled and the elderly, and caring for pets during and after an emergency:

www.redcross.org; www.fema.gov;
www.ready.gov; and www.prepare.org.

U.S. Sen. John Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice, and Bexar County District Judge.